

SELFIDGE FIELD, BUILDING No. 121
(Parachute Hut)
Wilbur Wright Avenue west of Ash Street
Mt. Clemens vicinity
Macomb County
Michigan

HAER No. MI-116-C

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Great Lakes Systems Office
Department of the Interior
1709 Jackson Street
Omaha, NE 68102-2571

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SELFRIDGE FIELD,
BUILDING #121(PARACHUTE HUT)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Location: North side of Wilbur Wright Boulevard between Birch and Maple Streets
Selfridge Air National Guard Base

Quad/UTM: U.S.G.S. Mount Clemens East Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 17.350680.4718820

Date of Construction: 1931 (modified 1982, 1986)

Present Owner: Air National Guard
3500 Fetchet Avenue
Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland 20762

Present Use: Air National Guard training and recreation

Significance: This building, designed to complement the Georgian Revival architecture of the bases initial permanent construction in the Cantonment district, assumed a critical role in servicing the base's flight mission in parachute preparation, a function it maintained until recently in servicing drag chutes for jet aircraft. It is one of the few buildings of its type erected in Michigan and is an excellent example of 1930s era military technology.

II. HISTORY

This building was erected in 1931 from plans provided by the Construction Division of the Office of the Quartermaster General.¹ In 1982 the building interior was extensively renovated and in 1986 plans provided by Straub Associates of Troy, Michigan provided for energy conservation measures including removal and reduction of window voids and replacement windows.²

This building represents a functional component of the permanent base construction initiated during the late 1920s and early 1930s. It is within the Cantonment District, extending to the north and east from the building site, and was designed to complement the district's dominant Georgian Revival style.

The Cantonment district is unified by its historical frame of reference, with all buildings being built within a 7 year period between 1927 and 1934.³ These

¹Original construction plans on file, Selfridge Base Museum

²Original plans on file Selfridge Base Civil Engineering

³ Nigro, Louis, Selfridge Air National Guard Base, An Unofficial History, unpublished ms., Public Information Office, Selfridge ANG Base, Michigan, 1977.

buildings replaced the frame, temporary buildings that were the hallmark of the original Selfridge Field, dating to ca. 1917 to 1918. Stylistically, all are substantial architect-designed buildings executed in a brick medium. All but the most functional structures display strong references to the Georgian Revival style in massing and in elements such as arched windows, quoins, and classical pediments.

This complex of buildings was built at the core of the original Selfridge Field and today is still the most distinctive cluster of architecture on base. The brick structures present today form a consistent entity of Georgian Revival architecture in the residential housing and duplexes (#220s to #250s series), and the administrative and support facilities (#300 to #350 and #3 to #140 series). It includes hangars, officers housing, barracks, and specialized buildings such as the parachute hut, squadron operations/control tower, fire station, and other maintenance and support facilities.

Buildings in the Cantonment area played a significant part in Selfridge's role as a training base during the war. The base expanded outward spatially and the

number of base structures mushroomed rapidly during the war.⁴ Although most of the new buildings were constructed in the base's newly acquired zones, a number were erected in proximity to the Cantonment core. Still, the Cantonment District provided a structural, functional, and stylistic anchor for the base.

The architectural and functional "core" of Selfridge, the original base, constructed prior to World War II, presents a virtually unique resource in Michigan. Few airfields that were exclusively military in genesis were built in the state and Selfridge is the oldest and best preserved example of its type. The concentration of brick structures built in the cantonment area of the base from the mid-1920s into the early 1930s form a cohesive assemblage.

III. DESCRIPTION

The Parachute Hut is composed of a 43 foot 4 inch by 27 foot side gabled unit and a 41 feet 6 inch by 60 foot 8 inch cross gabled unit, creating a total building depth of 87 foot 4 inch. This single story building's elevations all are

⁴Anonymous, Brief History of Selfridge Air Force Base, 1917-1960, unpublished ms., Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1960.

composed of standard bond brick resting on a concrete block water table. The roof is still sheathed in the original slate shingles, while the frieze and fascia are executed in wood. The principal (north elevation) presents a side-gabled three bay wide unit defined by a steel frame water table window, a large steel frame central window and a flat-roofed, projecting 8 foot by 20 foot corner entry vestibule with double steel pedestrian doors. The facade originally presented a symmetrical three bay composition with linear voids flanking the large central window, but the original fenestration has been bricked in. The west elevation is composed of five bays defined by the two-story pedimented gable and four bays defined by present and former window voids in the single story cross bay unit. A louvered vent occurs within the pedimented gable above a former window void as large as that remaining on the facade, a steel window is positioned in the water table below, and aluminum replacement window sash occur in the other bays. The gabled south elevation is distinguished by its wood fascia and gable returns. It is a symmetrical three bay composition, defined by a central bricked in window void flanked by reduced voids in which have been placed aluminum replacement windows. A louvered vent occurs within the gable above painted signage "Parachute Shop." The east elevation was originally almost identical to the west, but its window voids have been completely filled and a steel pedestrian entry door has been incorporated.

The interior of the side gabled unit originally contained undivided space for a 27 foot by 43 foot 4 inch Drying Room, while the cross gabled bays of the 60 foot 8 inch by 41 foot 6 inch Parachute Room were supported by square concrete piers on 13 foot 4 inch centers. An office, toilet and closet were located in the southeast corner of the Parachute Room. The interior of the building lacks any ornamentation or trim and asbestos tile floor covering is employed in areas other than the two story northern rooms that bare reveal concrete floors. In 1982 the upper portion of the eastern half of the basement Drying Room was later partitioned through construction of a steel floor into a first floor Sewing Area. Although the parachute suspension hooks and pulley still survive in the unit, the lower portion today serves as a weight room. The 1982 renovations erected frame partition walls, to create four additional offices and storerooms and a women's toilet in the former Parachute Room.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. BOOKS

Anonymous, Brief History of Selfridge Air Force Base, 1917-1960, unpublished ms., Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1960.

Nigro, Louis, Selfridge Air National Guard Base, An Unofficial History, unpublished ms., Public Information Office, Selfridge ANG Base, Michigan, 1977.

B. NEWSPAPERS

Detroit News, "From the Flying Jenny to the Jets." Detroit News, June 26, 1967.

C. CONSTRUCTION DRAWINGS

Copy of construction drawing, dated February 6, 1931, Construction Division Office of the Quartermaster General, in possession of Selfridge Base Museum, Mt. Clemens, Michigan. Foundation, First Floor Plans, Elevations, Details, Plan No. 6658-130.

Copy of construction drawing, dated September 17, 1982, Straub Associates, Troy, Michigan, in possession of Selfridge Base Museum, Mt. Clemens, Michigan. Energy Conservation, Existing and Proposed Plans, Sheet 5 of 5, MCP-93.

Copy of construction drawing, dated May 12, 1986, Straub Associates, Troy, Michigan, in possession of Selfridge Base Museum, Mt. Clemens, Michigan. Building Elevations, Sheet 4 of 4, Drawing 210-190.

D. INTERVIEWS

Colonel Robert Stone (Ret.), Curator, Selfridge Base Museum, October 13, 1995.

Eric Reeve, Selfridge Environmental Management, October 12, 1995.